HAWKE’S BAY COASTAL HAZARDS

Infrastructure Protection versus Managed Retreat

Synthesis of material released by Hawke’s Bay Regional Council under LGOIMA

OIR-26-092 & OIR-26-095 | Released 7 August 2026 after Ombudsman intervention | Independent researcher

1. Purpose and Context

This synthesis extracts the highest-value findings from the package of technical, economic and community-engagement documents released by Hawke’s Bay Regional Council on 7 August 2026 following sustained LGOIMA pressure and Ombudsman involvement (Case 044272). The release covers the Clifton to Tangoio Coastal Hazards Strategy workstream.

The central question examined is whether the available evidence supports prioritising early managed/planned retreat, or whether detailed analysis points instead to near-term infrastructure protection as the more cost-effective pathway for most units. The documents show a clear answer on that point.

This brief is provided for elected members, researchers and legal practitioners who need a concise, evidence-based view of what the released material actually says, rather than what later public messaging may imply.

2. Core Finding from the 2022 Real Options Analysis

The most important single document in the release is the Infometrics Real Options Analysis update (August 2022) prepared for Hawke’s Bay Regional Council. It compared the economic costs of protection pathways against managed retreat across the priority coastal units.

The headline conclusion is unambiguous:

“Overall, although commencing managed retreat for most of the Clifton to Tangoio coast is currently too costly in relation to probable damage risk, as an adaptation option it should never be discarded. Beyond 2125, if not before, the risk profile could be quite different.”

In plain terms: for the majority of the coast, starting managed retreat in the short-to-medium term is not the least-cost strategy. Protection options (renourishment, groynes, barriers, seawalls) rank better against expected damage costs for the next several decades.

Preferred least-cost pathways (Infometrics summary table)

Area / Unit	Least-cost adaptation strategy
Units B+C+D (Whirinaki, Bayview, Westshore)	Beach renourishment followed by control structures (groynes, breakwaters). Managed retreat could be reconsidered around 2065.
Unit E2 (Pandora)	Status quo until ~2045, then storm-surge barrier + mobile flood barrier. Managed retreat could be considered in 2065.
Unit K (Haumoana & Te Awanga)	Groynes and beach renourishment preferred. Earlier work showed partial retreat of properties closest to the sea can also be cost-effective (data not updated in 2022).
Unit L (Clifton)	Completion of the seawall may be justified. Managed retreat is too expensive relative to the value of assets still exposed.

The analysis explicitly states that for most northern units managed retreat is “too expensive to commence in the short term” and “should be deferred until around 2065 unless plans are made redundant by an extreme climate event or new information.”

3. Planned Retreat Costings Exist – and Are High

The Tonkin + Taylor report (July 2022) was commissioned specifically to cost planned/managed retreat as an alternative if no further resilience works were undertaken. It covers property and infrastructure potentially at risk over 0–20, 20–50 and 50–100 year horizons, implementation methods (acquisition, planning signals, insurance, staged community relocation), and high-level cost components (planning/preparation, enabling investment, active retreat, clean-up).

Key points from that work:

- The report quantifies properties and road/rail corridors exposed under coastal erosion hazard and 1% AEP inundation extents for each priority unit.
- It treats planned retreat as a proactive, coordinated process rather than ad-hoc abandonment, and includes preparatory and clean-up costs that earlier pathway work had often omitted.
- Even with those fuller costs included, the Real Options Analysis still found early retreat was not the least-cost path for most units when compared with protection options.

In other words: detailed retreat costings were produced, and when placed alongside protection costings they did not overturn the preference for near-term infrastructure solutions.

4. Detailed Protection Engineering Already Exists

The release also includes substantial short-term concept design and costing work:

- HBRC Report 5537 (January 2021) – Wave, shoreline evolution and gravel barrier response modelling; groynes design and cost estimates.
- HBRC Publication 5588 (May 2022) – Short-term concept design and costing for flood defences in the Pandora Unit.

These are not high-level concept notes. They are engineering design and costing packages for specific protection interventions. Their existence reinforces the Real Options Analysis finding that workable, costed protection options were on the table.

5. What the Community Said (April 2026 Surveys)

Two community surveys were completed in late 2025 / early 2026 (117 responses on values; 221 on funding). Key messages:

- Strong support for investing in advance to reduce risk, rather than relying primarily on repair after events.
- Highest investment priority across both coastal and non-coastal respondents: resilient public assets and infrastructure.
- Almost 80% of non-coastal respondents indicated some willingness to contribute proactively to coastal hazard risk mitigation.
- Coastal residents favoured more shared funding; non-coastal residents were more inclined to place costs on directly affected owners — but still showed meaningful willingness to contribute.
- Recurring free-text themes: affordability, fairness, transparency, and the distinction between private benefit and wider public benefit.

There is tension between protection advocates and those who prefer retreat or minimal intervention, but the dominant signal is support for proactive action focused on infrastructure resilience, not a clear mandate for early large-scale retreat.

6. Transparency and Process Issues

These documents were not proactively published in a form that made the comparative analysis easy for the public or elected members to find and use. They were released only after formal LGOIMA requests, multiple extensions, and Ombudsman intervention. That pattern is itself material.

When detailed protection design, real-options ranking that favours near-term protection, and community preference for infrastructure investment exist, yet public communication and later planning processes continue to lean heavily on retreat language, a transparency gap opens. Ratepayers and property owners cannot properly scrutinise the trade-offs if the underlying cost-benefit and engineering work remains difficult to access.

This is consistent with the wider national pattern already documented across multiple regions: incomplete or hard-to-obtain comparative analysis of infrastructure investment versus managed-retreat pathways, default public messaging toward evacuation and retreat preparation, and a central funding vacuum for large-scale flood and coastal protection works.

7. Implications for Decision-Makers

From the material now in hand:

1. Any claim that early managed retreat is the evidence-based default for the Clifton to Tangoio coast is not supported by the 2022 Real Options Analysis.
2. Detailed, costed protection options were developed and ranked as preferred or competitive for most units over the next two to four decades.
3. Community survey results align more closely with proactive infrastructure investment than with a rapid shift to retreat.
4. The existence of this body of work strengthens the case for requiring any future strategy update or Long Term Plan decision to re-state the comparative analysis in plain language, including updated costs and residual risk.
5. The same questions arise nationally: where is the equivalent comparative analysis for other high-risk coastal and flood-prone areas, and why does public messaging so often default to retreat language when the underlying technical work (where it exists) points elsewhere?

8. Recommended Use of this Material

- For Hawke’s Bay elected members: insist that any updated strategy or funding decision explicitly revisits the 2022 least-cost pathways and explains any departure from them with new evidence.
- For other councils and regional bodies: treat the Hawke’s Bay package as a worked example of what proper comparative analysis looks like — and note that even here it required formal information requests and Ombudsman involvement to surface.
- For legal and advocacy work: the Real Options Analysis and community survey results provide contemporaneous evidence that early large-scale retreat was not the preferred economic or community pathway at the time the detailed work was done.
- For the national transparency record: this release should be cross-referenced with the wider pattern of incomplete infrastructure-versus-retreat analysis, central funding gaps, and insurance/lending retreat on older and hazard-noted housing stock.

9. Primary Sources (Released 7 August 2026)

- Infometrics – Real Options Analysis of Strategies to Manage Coastal Hazard Risks in Hawke’s Bay – An Update (August 2022)
- Tonkin + Taylor – Implementation approaches and indicative costs for planned retreat (July 2022)
- HBRC – Short-term concept design and costing – Groynes design and cost estimates (Report 5537, January 2021)
- HBRC – Short-term concept design and costing – Flood defences Pandora Unit (Publication 5588, May 2022)
- Traverse Environmental – Clifton to Tangoio Coastal Hazards Strategy: Community Survey Outcomes (20 April 2026)
- Community Reference Group Report to HBRC (April 2026); Wider Community Engagement Report (April 2026); Cultural Values Report (2017)
- Hawke’s Bay Climate Change Risk Assessment (Urban Intelligence)

This synthesis is offered for public-interest purposes. It does not replace the full technical reports, which should be read in their own right. It is intended to make the core comparative findings accessible so that decision-makers and the public can see what the evidence actually shows.